
EXHIBIT 1 TO THE DECLARATION OF
DAVID ANTHONY YALLOP

TRANSCRIPT OF CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE PODCAST

[Music]

"Hello and welcome to the third edition of The Chipod."

"I'm lucky enough to be here bringing you news from the set of The Last Confession. I hope you enjoyed The Office edition and I'm sure this, The Confession edition, will satisfy your craving for more festival news and conversation. We have plenty to keep you entertained including an insightful interview with David Suchet and David Jones as they discuss this new play, the rehearsal process and working together again after fifteen years. Also we talk to the remarkable writer and New York lawyer, Roger Crane, about his inspiration for the Play and its world premiere here in Chichester. We also listen into Crane's exclusive pre-show talk recorded here on the third of May."

"But first here's our frank, personal and involving discussion between the director and his leading actor, who have worked together and known each other for over fifteen years. Sarah Lowrie speaks with David Suchet and David Jones."

SL: I gather gentlemen you've worked together before, I think it's possibly some time ago and perhaps you could talk a little about your past experience, why it is you are keen to work together again.

DS: Its very, very good that we are together, what's, what's wonderful about being together on a play like this is that, I suppose we've done a five week rehearsal period, or, you cut out two weeks having to get to know you or how somebody works, how, how David works or the director works or how the

actor works. Er. We've got history, and the history goes right back to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company and, er, that's very bonding isn't it.

DJ: I think so and I think for me this is my first piece of direction in English theatre for ... er ... twelve years ... um ... and to have a cast led so superbly by David which understands about text, so that if I say ... er ... it's a comma there or a semi colon might help you or I don't see that word on my page and they don't - I mean the Americans will kill me if I say that to them - I still say it to them, but ... er ... it's a totally different attitude to text.

DS: I think we are very blessed in having (a) a play that has more than three or four characters, which most modern plays do today (b) its not full of blinding swear words or absolutely obsessed with sex or some other - or some other many perversions. This is a play which I think is, is, is, is, in a sense hitting at the heart of theatre because it's exciting theatre, it's challenging theatre, but it's also language theatre. The words on this page, on every page of this play, are very carefully thought out by a, a legal brain, they are very particular and if you get it wrong it doesn't feel right.

DJ: Yes and we see, interestingly enough, er, varieties of Pope in this play. The Play asks the question what does a man need to be the Pope and maybe its not all the religious virtues, maybe he has to be a tough guy as well, maybe he has to be devious and political. Uh, maybe that is for the good of the Church to have someone who is a real operator running the whole show.

SL: Could you now talk, maybe both of you, each from your different perspective a little bit about how you prepare for a rehearsal period maybe especially with a brand new text like this.

DS: I went to Rome because I've (a) I've never been to Rome but I wanted to get a sense of what the Vatican, how the Vatican stands, where it stands and its effect on the City and that was very instructive because the City actually revolves around the Vatican. And the Vatican's power is so evident in the City and the Catholicism there is so, so strong and one learnt of, er, which I didn't know before, that the first Church in Christendom was in fact built in Rome and I didn't know that that was before, you know, that's if you like, the, the first one that was allowed by Constantinople, er, when Constantine - when he allowed Christianity. I, er, that, I, I found very instructive. I, I managed to get inside the Vatican City which I found very instructive and I also decided - er - to take myself in England off to - um - a retreat. I went into - er - five day silence with an Order of the Benedictines and just to (a) find out, find out what happens to me, but also to spend a little time in a religious community. You become very normal, very quickly in that situation which is a great help with this play, a huge help with this play, because the one thing yes, you have to be a Cardinal, but most important, in this play, that's what Roger's written is, is a human being. So that was very instructive. That was my basic reason.

DJ: I think David has been ... He undervalues the amount of preparation he has done, I think he has been extraordinary, in the trip to Rome and the retreat etc. Um, I feel in a way lazy by comparison -uh- but I think a lot of directors if you say "why are you doing another new play" they say I love the research. I think the most difficult thing for all of us to grasp is the depth of religious experience all these guys in this play have and we did a very interesting exercise and I didn't think it out until the day before and I, we spent a whole half day with everyone in the cast giving a ten minute summary of the religious experiences of their life and it was an amazing revelation. Everybody had something really fascinating and offbeat and individual to say and actually the act of sharing became almost a confessional and out of that I think that we ended, was that the first day we did that ...

DS: Uh, that was the second, second ...

DJ: the second day, after, yes, before we did the slow read through and actually suddenly everybody knew everybody else.

DS: And I think also what was good about that is that the one thing that, er, in today's secular society and very cynical society, the one thing people do not talk about in any, in any great depth or seriousness is faith or religion. It's always a very private matter and most people today are probably agnostic or atheist and don't want to get involved and if, if you start religion at a dinner table, people want you to shut up very quickly. What David, by doing that, allowed this subject that we don't talk about and don't touch, to come out. Consequently in, in, and, and I'm sure this is true, we will not do it again because we don't need to.

[Music]

"I must say thank you to David Jones and David Suchet for taking time out of their busy rehearsal period to talk to The Chipod. With his debut play set for a national tour, whilst still working as a lawyer in New York, Roger Crane's life has taken an artful turn of late.. We caught up with him to ask him about the journey from text to stage, having his play produced here in the UK and his future plans."

[Applause]

RC: It is a play about something, something important. Yes, it's about a murder and I'll go through the themes. But it's about religion, something we are usually uncomfortable talking about. It's about faith. Um, it's about issues about faith. Ultimately I think it's, it exalts faith. But you'll make up your own minds.

SL: How does it feel to have your first play produced here in the UK?

RC: I think it's an extraordinary journey to have gotten here but I mean considering I wrote it on a back porch in a house in upstate New York and now here I've ended up in what was once the National Theatre founded by Laurence Olivier. It's a first play written by a 50 year old man, a little older now, uh, and I think that the story that if you did a film of it no one would believe it.

RC: There aren't lot of new commercial plays that have seventeen speaking roles in them. They're too, too expensive. The National Theatre may do it occasionally with limited runs but- and its been many many years before someone has done this and it's a credit to Chichester and the London producers that they're doing a play like this. But it tells other people what can be done, especially a new play by an unknown playwright.

SL: What made you become a writer?

RC: The love of words, er, and literature. It is a way of exploring human character in a way that science and other things can't really do and exploring it on the stage live has a power of its own. Um, and the stage is about words and, and words are what I love.

SL: Do you think your experience in law and debate had affected your writing style?

RC: Yes, I think when I was younger and I wasn't a producer and just wrote for fun, I was a lot more flowery and a lot more speeches with longer sentences. I think it, it's caused me to be much leaner in the dialogue and there are a couple of cross examination scenes in the play, which I think it would be hard for a non-lawyer to write.

SL: Yes, I agree, actually. Who are your heroes in literature and theatre?

RC: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and I have to give you one Brit, so Shakespeare.

RC: The structure of the play, I'm told by people, they think it's very cinematic. Uh, I gave them my description of the structure and then decided that I was becoming becoming an egomaniac, but I don't mean it in that sense. The structure of is Shakespearian in, in my viewpoint. It's got a lot of short scenes. The scenes are packed with action. If the actors miss one line of dialogue, everything falls apart, as they discovered in rehearsals. [Laughter].

SL: Is the play your version of what you think happened?

RC: Yes, but it's, it's, it's the underlying facts are pretty indisputable, but obviously and actually if you go and look at the books you will see some lines of dialogue are quotes from people, and one of the things I like, no one can tell where I have written, what 99% is mine, where my writing is mine and where the quotes [inaudible]. But it's my, it's not a documentary, it's my view of the Church and what could have happened. Based on facts that did happen.

SL: You use a lot of real names and characters in there. Have you had many troubles with them ...?

RC: All real names, uh, which has caused me to try to be as accurate as I can. Uh, fortunately, many of them are dead but not all.

RC: It is about faith. It is about the difficult questions of faith. Why does evil ever triumph? Why is there suffering of innocents, when we have a benevolent God? Ultimately, I believe the play – and I've, I've been told people, especially some wives, have not wanted tickets because they've heard the play questions faith. Yes, it raised questions, but I believe that the end of the play is an affirmation of faith. And the principal character in this play is a Cardinal Bennelli. He was ...

All the people in this play are real people. All the real names have been used.
Hopefully my solicitors can protect me.

[Laughter]

SL: Where do you write?

RC: Uh, I prefer with a pad of paper as long as it's, the temperature is nice, and the weather is like it is here today to sit in my back porch and write.

RC: The play was written in twelve weeks over twelve weeks-ends because I was working full time. I wrote it in longhand because I wrote faster that way and typed it in an evening on a computer.

SL: What are your plans for the future now you have had your first play produced?

RC: Well, I, I got no excuse not to write another one, my excuse was before that if I could not get this done why should I waste time writing another. Um. So, unless the critics totally crush me, which they may [laughs]. They, er, yes. I would like to write a play about the Middle East.

SL: Thank you very much for being with us on the podcast.

[Music]

[NOTE: This transcript was first transcribed from a tape recording of the podcast (as recorded on JHW's Sonic Stage software), but then checked against the Sonic Stage recording, which is clearer than the tape].

EXHIBIT 2 TO THE DECLARATION OF
DAVID ANTHONY YALLOP

BROADCAST ON RADIO 4, WED 30 MAY, 19:15:

"FRONT ROW": with Mark Lawson

[Summary of what's to come:]

"One of Britain's leading actors turns from Poirot to the Priesthood..."

[Extract played from the play itself:]

"What happened that evening of September 28?"..... "Was it the coffee? Was it the sweets he loved? Or was it his bottle of pills?"..... "There was no evidence he was poisoned, you destroyed the evidence"..... "No Pope is more important than the Church'."

"David Suchet interrogating a possible killer of Pope John Paul the First in the play The Last Confession. The actor and playwright Roger Crane discuss this Vatican thriller later."

...

"A successful new play explores the possibility that Benedict XVI's last but one predecessor, Pope John Paul the First was himself the victim of a hideous crime: murdered by conservatives within the Vatican who feared his liberal reforms. The Last Confession, on its way to the London West End after a highly praised premiere in Chichester, is a first play by Roger Crane, a New York lawyer. David Suchet, one of Britain's most recognisable actors for roles including Hercule Poirot on TV, plays a Cardinal who suspects pontifical homicide. I discussed this Vatican thriller; less a 'whodunit' than a 'did-they-do-it', with the playwright and, first, the lead actor. David Suchet recently did some biographical acting as the tycoon Robert Maxwell on television, but I suggest that theatregoers may be less aware that his character in The Last Confession, Giovanni [sic] Benelli, Cardinal of Florence, was also a real life figure".

[David Suchet (Lead Actor):]

“He was absolutely the ... a Pope maker and was responsible with a great deal of political manipulation and deep prayer, the two in combine, in getting John Paul the First as the Pope and ... um ... within 33 days the Pope having died, Benelli actually goes through a tremendous crisis of faith and then goes for Pope himself.”

[Mark Lawson (Interviewer):]

“Cardinal Benelli, as you say, a real man but it is an interesting comparison, you have just played Robert Maxwell, a real figure, about him dozens of books were written. Benelli, though real, very little is known about him. Did you try to find out about him?”

[David Suchet:]

“Yes I did, I thought it was beholden for me to do that because he ... he did exist but I wanted to know what sort of man he was and all I could find were documents within various books that had been written, from which obviously the story of this play has been taken. I haven’t met anybody who actually knew him, except I did get a wonderful letter from a member of the audience who had Audience with Pope Paul the Sixth and actually got a letter from Cardinal Benelli and they have given it to me which is wonderful, so I have seen his handwriting. There is not much known about him, except that he was not very popular in the Vatican and he was known as the Pope’s hangman.”

[Roger Crane (Playwright):]

“I remember this Pope who died under mysterious circumstances, at least they seemed to be, and I thought well, right I could [inaudible] the fictional story about murder of a Pope, but [inaudible] what about the Vatican and how it works. So I started reading about this particular Pope John Paul the First and the Vatican, and I thought, well maybe it doesn’t have to be so fictional after all and that’s what led me to write what I wrote.”

[Mark Lawson:]

"And [inaudible] as you will know from having done the research, that many people have written on this, there are varying versions. David Yallop, a writer, has stated quite clearly that he believes that Pope John Paul the First was murdered. John Cornwell, another writer, has suggested that he died from neglect as he wasn't given the proper medical attention, he had a heart condition and so on. You leave it to the viewers to judge very much in the play, but which do you tend towards, do you think he was murdered?"

[Roger Crane:]

"Well ... um ... I read obviously both of those books along with probably a dozen other books on the subject and I am a lawyer and there are contradictions in things that happened that are too coincidental to be explained away simply by saying it was natural causes, and I tried to put in the play facts and the possibility of murder that no one could really dispute. I just lay out those facts and to me when you look at those facts there is, well I don't think it's the way the English would put it, proven beyond reasonable doubt. I think there is a very strong case that it could have been murdered."

[Mark Lawson:]

"It struck me watching it, that one of the interesting things about Catholic priests is that they are asked to be celibate and we don't get that many celibate characters in fiction (I think probably Poirot is celibate as well we suspect) but it is interesting. Do you think about that, because it does affect the relations with other characters doesn't it, particularly in a play like this where every character apart from one is male."

[David Suchet:]

"A society ... er ... that he would have been used to, but I think, I hope, as a full red blooded man I think that any relationship with the opposite sex has to be subdued and one of the calls for Paul in the New Testament is to have control over your body and

subdue passions and I think that that is as much of a difficulty and this is necessary if you are going to become a Catholic Priest, but I think it's a fight. I don't think it is something that any man takes on easily and I think it is a struggle for life."

[Roger Crane:]

"The underlying facts of the play I tried to base them as closely on history as I could and there are places where I have in fact included quotes from people."

[Mark Lawson:]

"And for example in a Courtroom, what a lawyer would have made much of is the fact that the Vatican's original statement said that the Pope was found reading a devotional book. It's subsequently suggested that what he had in his hands were papers ... um ... sacking several senior members of the Church hierarchy, in effect, and this this is a key detail in your play. At an Agatha Christie level the motive for murder would have been that he was about to end the careers of several senior figures in the Church."

[Roger Crane:]

"[Inaudible] motives were possibly murder, but I think become the more interesting part of the Play, at least from my perspective, is the struggle that was going on at the time between the liberal Catholics, [inaudible] were call them the John the Twenty-Third Vatican Two Catholics, and the conservatives/reactionaries who were trying to move the Church back."

[Mark Lawson:]

"I wouldn't normally talk too much about costumes, but I think in this case it is significant. You have a tremendous robing scene where he becomes Cardinal and he puts on the red robes and that must help as an actor because what they get to wear is so significant in the Catholic Church."

[David Suchet:]

"I got such a shock when I looked in my dressing room mirror because I had never seen myself in robes with a skull cap and a big cross on my chest and my first reaction was: 'who's that', because what I did not want to play was the image of a Cardinal. I did not want to play this religious man. I wanted to play a man who has a religion, but who has ambition, pride and is as flawed as all of us."

[Mark Lawson:]

"You move between theatre and television regularly. Um. Do you – is it different technical acting – do you have do two settings as it were, I mean can you just switch easily between the two or do you find yourself being too big on television, too small on stage at the beginning?"

[David Suchet:]

"Each medium, you are absolutely right, needs a different technique. For example, whether I am doing movie or television the camera is deaf. Somebody else is listening to the sound, all the camera is, is a very big eye that can actually see behind my own eyes, which means I don't have to show it that much. On a stage, the eyes of those who are watching me, and they may be 50, 60 70 feet away, so I have to demonstrate more."

[Mark Lawson:]

"It is interesting [inaudible] say that on television you don't have to show so much with the camera but in Poirot you are asked to an extent that nobody previously, apart from I don't think from John Thaw in Morse, was asked to do these long long reflective shots in which Poirot is thinking. What do you do there, I mean are you – you're thinking what he's thinking are you?"

David Suchet:

"Ah, very very much so, because I think the eye of a camera is, is a lie detector and if I pretend to think, you will know it watching, here I have to actually work out what

Poirot is thinking at any one time, because there is a lot of ... er ..., as you say, there is a lot of reflection and if I don't reflect properly I will never draw you into thinking what is he thinking."

[Mark Lawson:]

"It's fascinating, so you think if you were thinking, I wonder what the Test Match Score is or what I might have for dinner tonight at the hotel, rather than why did Mrs Hastings walk out of the house at 7.15 in the morning, you think some, in some way we would know?"

[David Suchet:]

"No, I don't think you would know *that*, but it would be very difficult for me to say the line afterwards if I was thinking about cricket rather than thinking about what he thought and I think that the tell tale may be how I then start speaking after the reflection."

[Radio Presenter sums up the interview:]

"David Suchet and Roger Crane. The Last Confession can be seen at Plymouth, Bath, Malvern and Milton Keynes before reaching The Theatre Royal, Haymarket in London from the 28th of June."

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EXHIBIT 3 TO THE DECLARATION OF
DAVID ANTHONY YALLOP



HOME NEWS WHAT'S ON FEATURES BLOGS ADVICE TALK WIN EBOOKS JOBS & AUDITIONS CLASSIFIEDS
ARCHIVE

The tribute show issue, Lord of the Rings, David Suchet

By Scott Matthewman on April 25, 2007 5:33 PM | [Email link](#) | [Comment \(0\)](#)

This week's edition of *The Stage* contains our annual supplement covering tribute bands and shows. If you're involved in performing, managing or hiring in this growing sector, then look no further for all you need to know.

Also this week:

In *Curtain Up*, we have the first photos of the *Lord of the Rings* set, newly installed at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Set and costume designer Rob Howell walks us through one of the largest get-ins in West End history.

In the light of Equity's campaign for an increase in West End actors' pay, **Mark Shenton** looks at why Broadway pays its actors more, despite having lower ticket prices.

Louise Finn looks at the comedy awards designed to recognise and further promote women on the comedy circuit.

Actor David Suchet talks about his two latest roles: playing Robert Maxwell on TV, and *Cardinal Benelli* in a new play.

The Last Confession, at Chichester Festival Theatre

We reveal the plans for Merseyside's proposed new indoor Shakespearean theatre.

Actor Matthew McNulty talks about his role in Channel 4's controversial army drama, *The Mark of Cain*.

We look back at seven successful years of touring for *The Vagina Monologues*.

Jodi Myers remembers the technical training she received from CSSD's **Peter Streuli**, and expresses her fears about comparable courses today.

And of course we have our columnists:

Maggie Brown on the need for contemporary drama to catch the nation's mood

Dilie Keane on life on tour in Australia

Dear John is asked: "As someone aiming to build a long-term career, do you think showbusiness reality shows can teach me anything?"

Flyman on certification schemes for technical roles backstage

Patrick Newley remembers a gone, but not missed, drag venue

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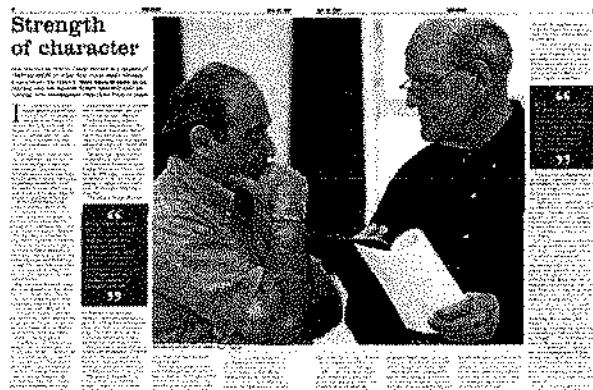
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Best known as Poirot, **David Suchet** is a master of creating depth in roles that could easily become caricatures. Next week, he stars as tycoon Robert Maxwell in a BBC2 drama.

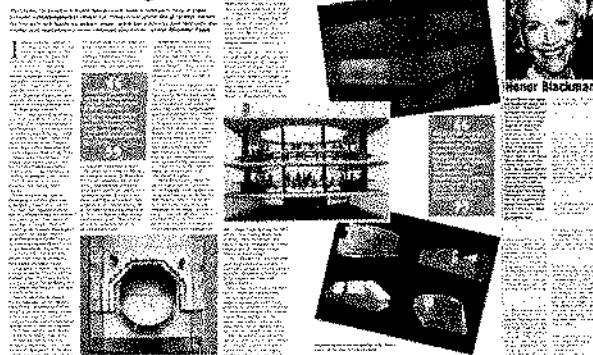
I liked the fact that [Craig Warner's] script wasn't a hatchet job. If I'm asked to play a villain, I look for what's good in them. If I'm cast as a good guy, I look for the bad. Everyone has a good side and a dark side, a lustful side and a puritanical side, we say one thing and mean another. Nobody is straightforward. I believe all bullies have a weak, vulnerable side, and I tried to look for that in Maxwell.

He is also to play Cardinal Benelli in a new play, *The Last Confession*, about the death of Pope John Paul I in 1978, coming to Chichester Festival Theatre.

This is not a docu-drama, but all the characters are taken from real life. It is all documented in the book, *In God's Name*, by Davis Yallop. Cardinal Benelli was Archbishop of Florence and extremely influential in getting John Paul elected. In the play, he conducts the investigation into the Pope's death, but he is not a detective. I haven't swapped my Poirot moustache for the cardinal's skull cap.

When I first read Roger Crane's play, I couldn't put it down. He is an American lawyer and I was most impressed by his language and structure. This is his first professional production. What I hope I've brought to the text is Benelli's driving ambition and his struggle with his own faith.

The next stage



Plans are afoot to build a Shakespearean theatre in Prescot, Merseyside. Unlike London's Globe, the Cockpit will boast an indoor stage, says Shakespeare North's executive director David Thacker:

Think of all the plays that were commissioned precisely for indoor events – such as *Measure For Measure*. So it would be fantastic for actors to play Shakespeare in a theatre that is authentic in that sense as well. And there are exact records for the 1620 theatre, whereas the Globe has been created quite necessarily from speculation, to a large extent. So the Cockpit will supply the missing piece of the Shakespearean jigsaw.

When Hamlet says, 'Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you trippingly on the tongue,' you can be sure that you can do that in a court theatre – but it's not so easy to do that at the Globe. If it's too 'trippingly on the tongue', no one is going to hear it at the back – you have to whack it out a bit.



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September 2007 (3)
August 2007 (4)
July 2007 (4)
June 2007 (2)
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April 2007 (3)
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19/6/07

Evening Standard

A thriller based on the death of Pope John Paul I could become the West End's least likely hit. The story will continue to fascinate, says its star David Suchet



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PERHAPS it's the *Da Vinci Code* or *Don Brown* or a discussion with *Omni Deli*, but I've been stunned by the amazing response," says David Suchet, star of a gripping mystery thriller about to open in the West End following rave reviews at its Chichester premiere last month. "Letters and messages have been pouring in. It's touched a nerve."

A pontiff found unexpectedly dead in bed, a crisis of faith and a nest of vipers in the Vatican — these are the fantastical true-life ingredients for Roger Craven's new play *The Last Confession*, about Pope John Paul I (Albino Luciani), the "smiling" Italian who occupied St Peter's throne in 1978 for only 38 days. Just weeks after his triumph as a burly, gravel-voiced Robert Maxwell in the BBC2 drama about the late tycoon, Suchet is tackling another fact-based role that once again centres around a sudden, unexplained death.

Swathed in gorgous scarlet, crucifix swinging, this brilliantly versatile actor plays Cardinal Benelli, who persuaded the reluctant John Paul to accept the Papacy from his responsible for his early demise.

"At the simplest level," Suchet explains, "this is a dark thriller about who murdered John Paul I, the Church's only really liberal, reforming and modernising Pope — if, indeed, he was murdered. On another, it's about one man's loss of faith, his bitterness and confusion, and a power struggle at the heart of the Catholic Church."

The Last Confession is based on David Yallop's book *In God's Name*, which has already sold more than six million copies (and had its central secret refuted by British journalist John Cornwell). Yallop argues that several cardinals — such as the shady Vatican banker Cardinal Marcinkus, a character in the play — stood to lose everything by John Paul's appointment.

These men are now dead. Why did they issue false statements about the circumstances of the pope's death? Why was the body hastily embalmed, with no autopsy? As the play hints, poisoned coffee, or even sweets, may have killed him.

"Since then, " Suchet comments, "we have had two arch conservatives in the Vatican, First John Paul II and now Pope Benedict. Luciani could have had a revolutionary and cataclysmic effect on Catholicism" — a religion observed by around one fifth of the world's population and now, as a result of immigration from Eastern Europe, the fastest-growing faith in the UK.

This gentle pope's death has also been linked with the prosaic fate of Roberto Calvi, "God's Banker", found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in 1982. He made fresh headlines this month when five people were acquitted of his murder: The CIA, the Soviet Union, Freemasons, Opus Dei and the mafia all have shadowy parts in this complex plot (touched on in the film *The Godfather: Part III*). Far from being solved, these Vatican mysteries have only deepened.

Such matters fascinate Suchet, 61, younger brother of John, the Beethoven-



Deadly sins: character actor David Suchet yet again proves his versatility with his role as a Vatican schemer after playing media tycoon Robert Maxwell

Suchet's act of faith

loving newsreader, not least because of his own deeply held religious faith. Born in London of a Jewish-Lithuanian gynaecologist father and Protestant mother, he converted to Christianity some two decades ago, finally being confirmed into the Anglican Church (by the Bishop of London) last year.

"Wikipedia has me down as a Catholic and that's now been repeated everywhere but it's not the case. Like many I'd long felt a need to explore spiritual matters. I happened to start by reading the

Letters of St Paul. Is it just chance I became a Christian? Perhaps. What if I had opened the Koran instead, or the Hebrew Bible?"

His own theological explorations have sharpened his understanding of the role of Benelli. "The issue of struggle and doubt and dogma is all too recognisable. Fanaticism scares the hell out of me. I visited Rome for the first time not long ago — just as a tourist — and was overwhelmed by the Vatican's dominance in the city. Seeing thousands of people in St Peter's Square kneeling down in the presence of the Pope was extraordinary."

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Did his wife, actress Sheila Ferris, with whom he has two grown-up children, object? "Not at all. She's very supportive, and recognises it matters to me. No wonder that TV racy series *The Monastery* was so popular. There's a huge hunger for spiritual peace."

We meet in his powder-blue dressing room in Bath's Theatre Royal, the play's last stop before the West End. Famous for his 70 TV episodes as Agatha Christie's Belgian detective Poirot, Suchet is perhaps most recognisable for his distinctive, hawkish eyebrows, which seem to arrive in the room ahead of the rest of him.

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Suchet reveals that he plays four more Poirots for TV and to make the complete set available on DVD, but stage acting remains a first love. "The real fun for me, the gift given to me as an actor, is the chance to play such different roles."

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A Suchet's resident with a passion for water (he is Chairman of the River Theatre Alliance) Suchet will travel to the Haymarket Theatre by boat, just as Shakespeare's actors were once ferried to the Globe. "I get off at Savoy Pier. One of my greatest joys is using London's Clipper river boats. Beautiful carpets, lovely seats, on the one from the Tate you can even get a cup of coffee. No traffic lights! The best way for Londoners to get about."

Each night his journey will take him under Blackfriars Bridge where, a quarter of a century ago, Roberto Calvi's body hung from scaffolding, with bricks and \$15,000 in his pockets. "Nothing is eternal except greed, ambition and death," remarks Suchet in *The Last Confession*. To that list might be added conspiracy theories.

• *The Last Confession* previews from 28 June at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Information: 0870 4000 626.



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SUCHET'S ACT OF FAITH

By Fiona Maddocks, Evening Standard 19.06.07

More articles by Fiona Maddocks

Perhaps it's the Da Vinci Code or Dan Brown or a fascination with Opus Dei, but I've been stunned by the amazing response," says David Suchet, star of a gripping mystery thriller about to open in the West End following rave reviews at its Chichester premiere last month. "Letters and messages have been pouring in. It's touched a nerve."

A pontiff found unexpectedly dead in bed, a crisis of faith and a nest of vipers in the Vatican - these are the fantastical true-life ingredients for Roger Crank's new play *The Last Confession*, about Pope John Paul I (Albino Luciano), the "smiling" Italian who occupied St Peter's throne in 1978 for only 33 days. Just weeks after his triumph as a burly, gravel-voiced Robert Maxwell in the BBC2 drama about the late tycoon, Suchet is tackling another fact-based role that once again centres around a sudden, unexplained death.

Swathed in gorgeous scarlet, crucifix swinging, this brilliantly versatile actor plays Cardinal Benelli, who persuaded the reluctant John Paul to accept the Papacy then felt responsible for his early demise.

"At the simplest level," Suchet explains, "this is a dark thriller about who murdered John Paul I, the Church's only really liberal, reforming and modernising Pope - if, indeed, he was murdered. On another, it's about one man's loss of faith, his bitterness and confusion, and a power struggle at the heart of the Catholic Church."

The Last Confession is based on David Yallop's book *In God's Name*, which has already sold more than six million copies (and had its central tenet refuted by British journalist John Cornwell). Yallop argues that several cardinals - such as the shady Vatican banker Cardinal Marcius, a character in the play - stood to lose everything by John Paul's appointment.

These men are now dead. Why did they issue false statements about the circumstances of the pope's death? Why was the body hastily embalmed, with no autopsy? As the play hints, poisoned coffee, or even sweets, may have killed him.

"Since then," Suchet comments, "we have had two arch conservatives in the Vatican. First John Paul II and now Pope Benedict. Luciani could have had a revolutionary and cataclysmic effect on Catholicism" - a religion observed by around one fifth of the world's population and now, as a result of immigration from Eastern Europe, the fastest-growing faith in the UK.

This gentle pope's death has also been linked with the gruesome fate of Roberto Calvi, "God's Banker", found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in 1982. He made fresh headlines this month when five people were acquitted of his murder. The CIA, the Soviet Union, Freemasons, Opus Dei and the mafia all have shadowy parts in this complex plot (touched on in the film *The Godfather: Part III*). Far from being solved, these Vatican mysteries have only deepened.

Such matters fascinate Suchet, 61, younger brother of John, the Beethoven-loving newsreader, not least because of his own deeply held religious faith. Born in London of a Jewish-Lithuanian gynaecologist father and Protestant mother, he converted to Christianity some two decades ago, finally being confirmed into the Anglican Church (by the Bishop of London) last year.

"Wikipedia has me down as a Catholic and that's now been repeated everywhere but it's not the case. Like many, I'd long felt a need to explore spiritual matters. I happened to start by reading the Letters of St Paul. Is it just chance I became a Christian? Perhaps. What if I had opened the Koran instead, or the Hebrew Bible?"

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He recently spent five days - in total silence - on retreat, at an Anglican Benedictine priory in Oxfordshire. "I didn't go because of the play. I went to pray and meditate but as much as anything, to get away from all the labour-saving devices of modern life which put us under such pressure."

Did his wife, actress Sheila Ferris, with whom he has two grown-up children, object? "Not at all. She's very supportive, and recognises it matters to me. No wonder that TV reality series



Deadly sins: Character actor David Suchet yet again proves his versatility with his role as a Vatican schemer



Say a little prayer: Suchet as Cardinal Benelli in *The Last Confession*

4

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The Last Confession is just the latest of a string plays to make drama out of recent history - Peter Morgan's Frost/Nixon, Tom Stoppard's Rock 'n' Roll, not to mention works by Michael Frayn, David Hare and David Edgar as well as the Tricycle Theatre's documentary dramas such as *Guantánamo*. Why the trend?

"People are always interested in moments in history, how events came about, who made things happen. But the West End is nervous about new plays and this one defies all the usual safety rules, having a huge cast of 15 main roles, mostly older men and only one woman, a nun!" Suchet reveals that he plans four more Poirots for TV and to make the complete set available on DVD, but stage acting remains a first love. "The real fun for me, the gift given to me as an actor, is the chance to play such different roles."

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Page 1 of 1

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6



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[< previous article](#)

Signs of the Times October 2007

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John Paul I

A suitable case for Hercule Poirot?

John Mackrell

John Mackrell is a retired lecturer in French History and a member of Catholics for a Changing Church.

'The Last Confession' about John Paul I, at The Haymarket in London, is both good theatre and a fascinating 'who dunnit?' David Suchet and his fellow actors, supported by the subtle direction of David Jones and Roger Crane's witty dialogue, provide a highly entertaining and thought-provoking experience. It is the director's achievement that the dialogue - some shrill exchanges with John Paul apart - appears chillingly authentic. That probably owes much to the actors' conscientious preparation, intriguingly described in the programme, which for once is under priced at £4.

David Suchet for his role as Cardinal Benelli, immersed himself in the part by visiting Rome's churches and taking a five day retreat in a Benedictine Abbey. Before rehearsals started, every actor confided to the company his own religious experiences - a convincing gauge of serious intent. As the play transports the audience to a world far outside their experience, its credibility is enormously enhanced by the ingenious stage set, which evokes simultaneously the claustrophobic Vatican, the expansive grandeur of St Peters and the encroaching world outside - never distant enough for the cardinals. The play, in short, is to be enjoyed, though the discreet cleric may feel more comfortable without a dog-collar.



Pope John Paul I

The play reopens a brief period in the Church's history, to which a helpful introduction is the biography of Pope John Paul I by David Yallop, on which the play is loosely based. [1] John Paul's election is believed by many, including the author, to have been one of the Church's great potential turning-points. If that's true, why? Those for whom history is determined by events believe a return to the ideals of Vatican II was frustrated by the Pope's sudden death on his thirty-third day in office. Others, with an eye to the long term, see the failure as proof that the Church is irreformable while ruled by the Roman Curia.

Was John Paul murdered? When Bianco Luciani was elected with a towering majority it was mainly as a pastor, to heal the Church's divisions exacerbated by Paul VI's indecision. The shock to the curia was palpable when he proved disconcertingly radical. His wish to rescind *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI's ban on artificial contraception, for some amounted to rank heresy. The army of some 3000 curialists was probably more worried by the Pope's determination to realise Jesus' mission to the poor, which they rightly sensed could jeopardise their own comfortable life-style. Of a piece was the Pope's intention to purge the Vatican's own bank of the corruption fomented by Roberto Calvi, Bishop Marcinkus.

7

Sindona and others linked to the Italian mafia. The curia itself appeared to be implicated, by the press accusation that over 100 members, from priests to cardinals, belonged to the mafia's infamous P2 masonic lodge, which had already dissipated the dwindling integrity of the Italian Government. Vatican bankers, freemasons, curialists, there was no shortage of people with a motive to welcome the Pope's departure. [2]

When Sister Vincenza at 4.45 am found the dead Pope seated in bed, holding some papers, lips parted with an agonized expression on his face, had he suffered a heart attack, as the Vatican was quick to claim without a proper medical examination? It could be argued that events the day before had strained the Pope's stamina. John Paul's anger was early aroused, when the Vatican's own newspaper, *L'Observatore Romano*, had deliberately sidelined his views on birth control. Later he had battled for two hours with Cardinal Villot, who had tried unsuccessfully to deter him from making the dramatic changes in curial personnel, recorded, almost certainly, in those very pages he clutched as he died. On the other hand, John Paul was only 65 and had low blood pressure, which considerably reduces the risk of heart disease. His personal physician after a recent health check had pronounced him 'not fit, but very fit'. John Paul had a healthy life-style as a non-smoker, light drinker, sparing eater, whose exercise included mountain climbing. His two secretaries had pronounced him calm and in good spirits when he retired to bed that night at 9.30. [3]

The obvious murder suspect was Cardinal Jean Villot. He had shown himself to be totally opposed to rescinding *Humanae Vitae* and may well have considered John Paul a heretic. He was on the list of curialists to be replaced and by a man he particularly disliked, Cardinal Benelli. Villot even qualifies apparently as a mason - adoptive name Jeanni, Lodge number 041/3, enrolled at Zürich, 6th August 1966. [4] On the morning of the Pope's death, Cardinal Villot seems almost to have gone out of his way to attract suspicion to himself. Before 5 am he had swept away almost all potentially compromising evidence. After taking the papers from the Pope's hand, he pocketed the bottle of effortil used to counter John Paul's low blood pressure. As it disappeared completely, no one will ever know if it contained a poison, such as the colourless, odourless digitalin which could have induced a heart attack. The Cardinal also removed the Pope's slippers and the glasses he was wearing - both of which may have borne traces of vomit from the poison. Before 5 am, Villot had already rung the embalmers, who were given strict instructions not to drain the body of blood, which might have contained traces of poison. By arranging the embalming so swiftly, an autopsy, later demanded when suspicions grew, was ruled out. The papal apartments were sealed in record time to keep them from prying eyes. Villot even added his own pious touch to the death-bed scene. The faithful were told that the Pope had died reading *The Imitation of Christ* - a truly miraculous feat, as John Paul's copy was still in Venice! [5]

Readers of detective novels may feel that Villot is too obvious a suspect. The Cardinal's behaviour on other occasions, especially with John Paul, was unfailingly correct, if cold. Was the Cardinal an accomplice? It seems unlikely that the murderer would have risked confiding in the Pope's right-hand man, his Secretary of State, who might be expected to feel at least some loyalty towards his master. Did Villot, innocent of involvement in the Pope's murder, suspect the hands of the mafia - perhaps, welcoming the deed while dreading the scandal? If so, in view of the Catholic hierarchy's obsessive preoccupation with suppressing scandals - shown recently so often in cases of clerical sexual abuse - Villot may have felt compelled, as a loyal churchman, to remove anything which could feed speculation about foul play.

Natural death or murder, the failure of John Paul's attempts at reform shows the strength of the Roman Curia. Within days Cardinal Wojtyla had succeeded as John Paul II, who, as arch-conservative, immediately swept his predecessor's instructions aside. [6] The mafia, therefore, continued to hold the Vatican bank to ransom, while curialists, whether masonic or not, remained secure.

(8)

The scandalised are told by historians that events were far worse in the past, as in the tenth century, when two enterprising ladies created and destroyed eight popes in a single decade. [7] Yet, the papacy's situation is different today. For much of the past, popes shared the life-style of secular rulers and their escapades remained hidden from the general public. Today the papacy is a prey to publicity, even when it does not court it. The Church's increasing centralisation, reinforced by the revolution in communications, have imposed Rome's view on Catholics almost everywhere. Can the Church afford to be ruled by a tyrannical and inefficient curia, unaccountable to either the faithful, or even to the pope? John Paul, however he died, was the last great reforming pope.

Notes

1 David A. Yallop, *In God's Name* , 1984. [back]

2 Yallop, 93-154. [back]

3 Yallop, 211-57. [back]

4 Yallop, 175. [back]

5 Yallop, 215-57. [back]

6 Yallop, 261-2. [back]

7 Peter De Rosa, *Vicars of Christ: The Dark Side of the Papacy*, 1988, 48. [back]

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